

## October 28, 2005: NORTON CALLS FOR PRIORITY ON CHILDREN IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### NORTON CALLS FOR PRIORITY ON CHILDREN IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Washington, DC — At a hearing on Juvenile Justice in the District of Columbia today, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) said that as she was less interested in where juveniles are incarcerated than in "how to keep them out of detention and commitment and how to make sure that those who nevertheless must be committed do not turn the mistakes of childhood into the crimes of manhood."

Norton commended the District for opening a new facility for detained children in the District but said that moving Oak Hill from Maryland depends upon finding a suitable alternative. Norton decried "the bankruptcy" of current thinking at all levels that is disproportionally fixed on "more and more adult sentences, even for small children and the outcry" by some when the Supreme Court struck down capital punishment for juveniles under 18. Congresswoman Norton's statement follows.\*\*\*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for working with me on this hearing concerning what the District of Columbia and the federal government are doing to improve the life chances of children committed to the city's juvenile justice system and the progress the city is making in meeting court and congressional juvenile justice mandates. Notwithstanding home rule and the District's responsibility for its own children, this is an appropriate congressional hearing because a major part of the juvenile system, the D.C. Courts, are Article I courts that fall under federal jurisdiction, although the applicable laws are enacted and enforced by the District.

Local and state governments, regardless of the nature and income of their residents, have been significantly unsuccessful in answering the question, what should society do when children commit adult crimes? Judging by newspaper reports, the District, Maryland, and Virginia are not exceptions. However, the District, one of America's big cities, has more of the conditions that breed not only juvenile delinquency but also serious crimes that children in cities and suburbs alike commit today. Regrettably, the District's facilities themselves have been so inadequate, public and governmental attention has been disproportionately focused more on the facilities than on the children. The District has responded by opening a new first class facility in the city for juvenile detainees, a very important step in reducing the housing of children who are being detained separately from those who have been committed. In addition, the Forest Haven juvenile facility was closed several years ago. This leaves one facility for detainees and committed youth, the Oak Hill Youth Center located in Laurel, Maryland. The subcommittee will be particularly interested in that facility today.

I appreciate the thinking of Representative Ben Cardin, due to testify here today, who has worked to find a practical way to move Oak Hill from his district and has offered some innovative and attractive ideas. These ideas, however, depend on finding a realistic alternative site, as I believe he recognizes, notwithstanding his bill, H.R. 316 that contemplates the closure of Oak Hill and the transfer of the land to the National Park Service and to Anne Arundel County, Maryland. Rep. Cardin's bill seeks a win-win, with the bordering National Security Agency paying for the construction of a new facility. Finding a location in the District, as his bill prefers poses a structural barrier to moving such a bill, however. The District is a small and constricted city whose land is disproportionately occupied by the federal government, the major reason that Congress located the facility outside of the city in the first place.

I am very pleased that today's hearing presents all involved an opportunity to get this and other ideas on the table for public discussion. This hearing will offer a bonus if it moves us pragmatically to solutions which burden no community while focusing us on the District's most disadvantaged children. These are not children in a state of teenage rebellion typical of these ages. These children have been cheated out of childhood itself. Most have been cheated from the beginning with birth out of every child's birthright, two caring parents or an extended family. Many are fatherless, have struggling single mothers, or no family, live in high crime neighborhoods long ago deserted by jobs, where thugs ply the underground economy that has replaced the jobs once available to their fathers and grandfathers. We are all implicated in making a mess of the lives of these kids in this country. The bankruptcy of national, state and local thinking and approaches is perhaps best shown by the move toward more and more adult sentences, even for small children and the outcry by some when the Supreme Court ruled that juveniles under 18 should not be subjected to the death penalty.

I hope that today's hearing will help us get beyond where and how juveniles are housed to how to keep them out of detention and commitment and how to make sure that those who nevertheless must be committed do not turn the mistakes of childhood into the crimes of manhood. I will listen to all of today's witnesses with intense interest. I am grateful to each of the witnesses for their work and efforts and for coming forward today.